



FARMER RESOURCE NETWORK
RESOURCE GUIDE

HOW TO CONTACT YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

UPDATED NOVEMBER 2024

Contacting elected officials can be intimidating, but making your voice heard and establishing relationships with legislators is crucial in making sure our democracy works. As a citizen, your voice matters and can play a huge role in lawmakers' decision-making and awareness around issues.

When advocating, calling your representatives is the best bang for your buck, because just a few minutes of your time can bring an issue to the attention of elected officials and make an impact. In fact, five to six phone calls can have the same effect as hundreds of email messages!

Representatives and their staff want to hear about how individuals are impacted by issues; staffers record information from calls and pass along what they're hearing to elected officials.

If you want to take action and advocate for farmers and a better food system, Farm Aid has made this step-by-step guide for contacting your elected representatives ([and a cheat sheet for confusing terms!](#)).

STEP 1. CHOOSE YOUR ISSUE

- Are you a farmer who wants to see a policy change? An eater who cares about where your food comes from? A parent who is concerned about your child's access to nutritious meals? Did you hear about a new bill or a piece of legislation you want to express support for or speak out against? All of these are great reasons to contact your elected officials!
- If you're unsure of where to start, local groups or advocacy organizations can be good resources for learning about issues. These organizations can also point you toward who to contact and what to say. Some organizations advocating for family farmers with local chapters include [National Young Farmers Coalition](#) and [National Farmers Union](#). [National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition](#) is also a great resource for staying informed about current issues.
- For information about policy and for policy updates, check out Farm Aid's [Action Center](#), [this marker bill tracker](#) created by our friends at [OEFFA](#) or this [tracker tool](#) and [action alert center](#) from our friends at [RAFI-USA](#).

STEP 2. WHAT'S YOUR ASK?

- Advocacy is most effective when there's a clear ask. Be sure to know what you are asking your legislator to do before you pick up the phone. If you can reference specific bill numbers or titles, that's also ideal.
 - Some types of asks might include sponsoring a bill, co-sponsoring a bill, opposing a bill, or taking action on a budget or funding area. It's less effective to raise a problem or issue without having a way for your representative to address it. That being said, representatives want to know what their

constituents are worried about, so bringing attention to an issue more broadly can also be effective!

- Take a few minutes to educate yourself about the issue. Elected officials are more likely to pay attention to a constituent who knows what they're talking about.

STEP 3. WHO'S THE TARGET?

- Is this issue a local, state or national issue? Your answer will determine who you should contact. If the issue is a state or municipal-level piece of legislation or local issue, you should contact your local representative.
- If the issue is national, you should contact your federally elected representatives—that is, your senator or congressperson.
 - It may be tempting to contact representatives from other states, but this isn't an effective tactic and can clog up phone lines unnecessarily. Ultimately, representatives care if you're someone that may vote for them during the next election and are focused only on their constituents.

STEP 4. CONTACT

- Federal representatives have district and national offices. You can contact either, though district offices often get a lower call volume and may be easier to reach.
- You can find out who your local, state and federal elected officials are here: <https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials>.
- Visit your elected officials' websites for more detailed contact information and ways to get in touch, including forms for scheduling meetings and sending messages.
 - To find your members' websites, visit [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov), where you can select your state from the dropdown list near the bottom of the page (beneath "Current Members of Congress"), and filter by "senators" or "representatives." From there, you can click on their personal page, see what legislation they're sponsoring and what committees they're on and find their office phone numbers and emails.

STEP 5. MAKE THE CALL

- Remember, the staffer who picks up the phone is a human who wants to hear from you! They get calls all the time and it's their job to listen to constituents, so while it might feel intimidating to you, they aren't going to be fazed and they aren't going to quiz you on what you say.
- Always provide your contact information: state your name, address, town and ZIP code so that the staffer knows you are in-district. This also ensures that your call will be logged.

- Deliver your message respectfully and in your own words. Avoid using pre-made scripts, as these types of messages are often weighed less heavily than unique messages. Instead, state your ask, give a short anecdote about why the issue is meaningful to you and thank the staffer for their time. Keep your message short and to the point!
- Here's a sample script you can use to craft your own message:
"Hello, my name is _____. I am a constituent of [name of representative] and my address is [state your full address, including your street number, city and ZIP code]. I am calling to ask [state your ask here]. This issue is important to me because [short personal anecdote or reason why this issue matters to you]. Thank you for your time."
- [Check out this fun video made by RAFI-USA that details how to call your representative.](#)

STEP 6. FOLLOW UP

- Remember to follow up with your legislator. If they take action on the issue, you can send their office a message or call again to thank them. The more they hear from their constituents, the more likely they are to care about and take action on an issue, so it's important to keep sharing information and encouraging others in your community to act! Posting to social media, writing an [op-ed](#) or sending an informational email to your contacts are all ways to spread the word. You can keep track of the status of legislation, including when a bill is introduced and who is currently a sponsor, on [Congress's website](#).

NOT FEELING THE PHONE?

BY EMAIL

- Unfortunately, there is no centralized list of email addresses for public representatives. The best way to find contact information for members of Congress is to visit a member's website, where you can find public email addresses or forms for submitting messages. Every member of Congress has a website with phone numbers for their DC and district offices, as well as contact forms for requesting meetings. You can find your representatives and links to their websites [here](#).

BY SNAIL MAIL

- While this method carries a lot of weight (it takes time and effort to compose and send a letter and includes your address, so congressional staffers take these seriously), it can take about a month for offices to receive and record letters, meaning that they aren't well-suited for time-sensitive issues.
- When contacting a national representative, send your letter to their state or district office, rather than their national office. You can look up your representatives and

find their websites (with their mailing addresses and other contact information) [here](#).

SOCIAL MEDIA

- Social media posts and campaigns are a good way to spread information to your community, but aren't great for getting your representatives to listen. This is because elected officials can't verify if social media messages come from constituents so they are less likely to pay attention to them.

CREATE A PETITION

- Websites like [Change.org](#) and [Jotform](#) make it easy to create an online petition. Online petitions can raise awareness of an issue, but they work best when paired with other forms of advocacy like phone calls, emails and letters.

SCHEDULE A MEETING

- Do you know representatives meet regularly with constituents, and that anyone can schedule a meeting? While you may not get face-to-face time with your elected official, you may be able to meet with someone on their staff. In fact, representatives have staff who regularly meet with constituents about different issues! You can find information about how to schedule a meeting with your representative on their website. [Here is a great guide](#) for how to set up these types of meetings with elected officials and what to expect!

CHEAT SHEET: DON'T LET CONFUSING TERMINOLOGY KEEP YOU FROM TAKING ACTION!

How to address representatives

- U.S. House members are addressed as “Congressman [Last name]” or “Congresswoman [Last name].”
- U.S. Senate members are addressed as “Senator [Last name].”
- At the state level, senators are addressed as “Senator [Last name]” and lower-house members are addressed as “Representative [Last name].”
- State legislative bodies may have different titles such as the State Assembly or General Court, but every state still has two houses—the lower and the upper house, equivalent to the House and the Senate of the U.S. Congress.

Bill names and titles

- Bills can be introduced in either legislative body (the House or Senate). Often, in order to build support for a bill, legislators aim to have versions of the bill introduced in both chambers of Congress. A bill must eventually pass (by receiving a majority of votes) in both chambers to become law.
- When a member of Congress introduces a bill, they are a “sponsor” of the bill. Other legislators can demonstrate support for the bill by becoming “co-sponsors.”
- Bills introduced in the Senate are given a number (indicating the order in which they were introduced), preceded by “S.” For example, the “Agricultural Resilience Act of 2023” is *S.1016*; it was the 1,016th bill introduced in the Senate in 2023.
- Bills introduced in the House are also given a number, preceded by “H.R.” For example, *H.R.1840* is the “Agricultural Resilience Act of 2023” introduced in the House.

Terms:

Here, we are using the terms “elected officials,” “representatives” and “legislators” interchangeably.

- **Act**—Legislation that has been passed by both the Senate and the House and signed by the president, becoming law. Laws are also known as Acts of Congress.

- **Bill**—formally introduced legislation. In the House, a bill is introduced when it is dropped in the hopper (a wooden box on the House floor). In the Senate, a bill is submitted to clerks on the Senate floor for introduction.
- **Committee**—Committees consider bills and issues and oversee agencies, programs and activities within their jurisdictions. For instance, the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry oversees the writing of the Farm Bill.
- **Co-sponsor**—a legislator who adds their name in support of a sponsor's bill.
- **District**—the geographic area that an elected official represents. Referring to something as in-district means that it occurs within a given district. For example, in-district events refer to meetings a Congressperson has back home in their district, rather than in Washington, DC.
- **Federal**—about or relating to the central national government of the United States.
- **Legislative body**—a group of lawmakers who pass, amend, or repeal legislation.
- **Legislation**—a law or a set of laws.
- **Legislator**—a member of the legislative branch who makes laws.
- **Marker bill**—Bills that are introduced to bring attention to certain issues and to assess and amass support for an idea. Marker bills are the building blocks of larger bills; the goal of a marker bill is to get it incorporated into a much larger, omnibus bill, like the Farm Bill.
- **Omnibus bill**—a large bill covering many diverse issues. The Farm Bill is an example of an omnibus bill, as it covers a range of issues including forestry, nutrition and crop insurance.
- **Rep**—shorthand for representative.
- **Sponsor**—the first House or Senate member to formally introduce a bill. Sometimes, committees may introduce bills. More than one person may be the initial sponsor of a bill.
- **Staffer**—term for a person working as a staff member for an elected official. Representatives count on staff to help them write legislation, understand and keep track of issues and answer phone calls.

SOURCES:

- <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/what-calling-congress-achieves>
- <https://www.vice.com/en/article/935bye/basic-guide-to-finding-and-calling-your-representatives>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/22/us/politics/heres-why-you-should-call-not-email-your-legislators.html>

CONNECT WITH FARM AID

Not finding what you need? Request one-on-one assistance from our Farmer Services Team by filling out our [Online Request for Assistance form](#) or by calling **1-800-FARM-AID (1-800-327-6243)**. Farm Aid staff are happy to listen and help you in all the ways we can.

FARMER RESOURCE GUIDES

Check out our Farmer Resource Guides for straightforward information created by our Farmer Services Team to help with topics that come up frequently on our 1-800-FARM-AID hotline.